

The Killing Age

How Violence Made the Modern World

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Preface

FOR AS LONG AS HUMANS have taken life and told stories, for as long as we have wanted something that is not ours, we have sought to make sense of our cruelty and penchant for bloodshed. We have beseeched our gods, demanding explanations for both the tragedies that befall us and the harms we have inflicted on others. We have sought relief in myths with their tales of heroic founders in a world where everything is divine and the future is preordained. We have invented religions and rituals, attempting to create order and meaning from the chaos of human creation and our seemingly boundless capacity for violence that so often defeats our capacity for love and the simple recognition of the lifeworlds of others. We have spun tales to create some distance, to offer a modicum of solace, to turn away from killing and, “from the mystic chords of memory,” toward what Abraham Lincoln optimistically called the “better angels of our nature,” a phrase he penned little more than a month before the American Civil War’s catastrophic beginning.

Over the last few centuries as our gods deserted many of us for some distant home and the West especially grew ever more secular, we have looked to the explanations of historians. History seemed to offer a way forward, a modern scientific discipline that explained humanity’s foibles and possibilities as to why things turned out the way they did. But in its quest for objectivity and scientific rigor, the discipline of history often stripped the past of its soul, turning even the

worst atrocities into “events.” History’s nightmares became ordered into periods and places, as if the devastations of human conduct could be found in archaeological strata beneath our feet, with most layers distant and settled and one epoch neatly following another.

But what if we think of history not as chronological layers but instead as accumulated wreckage, an extraordinary storm that has swept across our planet? This is the contemporary nightmare of global warming.¹ In the twenty-first century, death, violence, and danger haunt us in unprecedented ways. We live with the sense that history has been so powerfully inscribed into the earth and into our daily lives that it confounds the very tenses we use to manage time and to distance ourselves from the past and its horrors. What we thought had disappeared into the obscurities of annihilation has suddenly become visible and insistent. Histories long thought to be hidden now stand right before our eyes, speaking directly to us.

The presence of our current climactic nightmare is unmistakable and insistent. By the end of the century, well over half of all species might be lost. Every day a bit more of Bangladesh dissolves into the Bay of Bengal, as does southern Louisiana many thousands of miles away. Sometime in the not-too-distant future, the small nation of Kiribati will vanish beneath the Pacific Ocean, the final insult of a seemingly irrevocable history two and a half centuries in the making; to the islanders, the disappearance of their homes and the scattering of the Kiribati people will be a kind of genocide. Storms have grown more ferocious everywhere. In the United States, Hurricane Harvey dumped a record of nearly fifty inches of rain on Houston in just a few days in 2017, a once in a five hundred thousand-year event (more than the history of the species *Homo sapiens*). In 2022 the monsoons arrived early and violently, turning large areas of Pakistan into a fetid lake and displacing millions of people. On the other side of the planet, much of the American West has been in the grips of a megadrought, the worst in over a thousand years. The Northern Hemisphere’s 2024 summer was the warmest on record.

Greenland’s glaciers are disappearing with ever-increasing rapid-

ity. Since 1972, Greenland has lost over ten thousand gigatons of ice, much of it in just a few years. Just this one part of the world has lost enough water to bury Manhattan in more than five thousand feet of ice. Once-silent spaces now rumble with hundreds of millions of tons of ice succumbing to the Atlantic and roaring waters plunging down moulins, with Cold War waste newly exhumed in the process. Vast amounts of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, are being released from disappearing permafrost. Equally huge amounts of methane drift into the atmosphere from the oil wells along the Niger Delta, where two centuries ago millions of slaves were forced into ships heading to the Americas. Spillages amounting to one *Exxon Valdez* yearly for the past forty years (some 440 million gallons) have made the area one of the most polluted on the planet.

A warming planet brings biological threats. Long-frozen pathogens have come back to life as if out of a horror movie, while habitat destruction has led to an increase in zoonotic diseases such as Ebola and COVID-19. Human migration is increasing drastically as vulnerable populations flee inhospitable zones and seek refuge in cities or in other countries, where they are often met with bigotry and xenophobia. Between 150 million and 250 million people now live on lands that will disappear; by 2100, a billion or more people may be displaced by encroaching seas. Large areas of the world may become uninhabitable, too hot for humans to survive. Devastation and displacement will be greatest in the Global South, including those urban coastal areas that grew tremendously from the middle of the eighteenth century with the rise of the capitalist world economy. The population of Calcutta (now Kolkata), for example, has swelled to over 15 million, 125 times its population of 120,000 in 1750. Kolkata is a city of profound inequalities, as is the case in cities the world over. Kolkata's poor are uniquely vulnerable to rising seas and ferocious storms, while the rich can build at higher elevations and buy air conditioners.

How did this happen? How have we created a world that may well threaten our survival as a species? We might recognize that humans are having an impact on our planetary home, but we are only

just beginning to understand the conditions that made our present nightmare possible and precisely when and how these disasters have unfolded. When did human relations become so entwined and globalized that they began changing the planet in such irrevocable ways that we can see them in the earth under our feet and the skies above our heads? How might the past look differently if we resist the tendency of opposing cultures and nature? What role does history, with its traditional focus on people, events, and periods—its concern with individuality and contingency and not the general forces determining human existence—have in the twenty-first century?

These questions stand at the center of contemporary global controversies ranging from environmental policy to demands for reparations from the West. Across the continents, millions of people are asking how we wound up here. How did we create this nightmare that has left us on the brink of planetary devastation? In 2020, thousands gathered in Bristol, England, to protest global warming and government inaction. A few months later, a different group of antiracist protestors smashed the bronze statue of slave trader Edward Colston (1636–1721) and tossed it into Bristol's polluted harbor. Bristol's protests resembled those unfolding in cities across the United States, with one group pursuing one kind of politics and another group pursuing something very different. Elsewhere, people have begun putting together what the English and American protestors pulled apart, demanding attention to the interconnections of global warming, inequality, colonialism, and racism.

This book offers one answer to the questions people have been asking about our current crisis. *The Killing Age* tells the story of how our world emerged from the worst violence and destruction in human history, a cataclysm that ranks second only to the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event sixty-six million years ago, when a giant meteor smashed into the Yucatán Peninsula, ending the reign of dinosaurs and paving the way for the rise of mammals. This more recent cataclysm took place roughly between 1750 and 1900 and before the

great world wars of the twentieth century and was made possible by the global spread of weapons and modern finance. It was an age of human possibility and greed and epochal destruction of human and nonhuman worlds, paving the way for the best of times for the privileged few and the absolute worst of times for the majority. Killing created global interconnection and the world we now inhabit, a world born in blood.

This is a different story about the origins of our present than those we have grown used to hearing recently. In 2000, Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen coined the word “Anthropocene,” the Age of Man, in an off-the-cuff remark at a conference. For Crutzen, who won the Nobel Prize for his work on the effects of aerosols on the ozone layer, the Anthropocene began with “carbonic” (CO₂) gases belching out of England’s textile factories and eventually spreading across the world, altering planetary systems and bringing an end to the Holocene era that had begun about twelve thousand years before and had established a generally hospitable world for humans. Crutzen gave a precise date for the launch of the Anthropocene: 1784, the year inventor James Watt designed a new steam engine.

Crutzen’s new word had staying power. From the mid-2000s, references to the Anthropocene developed a life of their own, appearing in newspapers, magazines, books, academic journals, conferences, college courses, a school, movies, popular fiction, poetry, the fine arts, the popular media, and even video games. “Anthropocene” entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2014. Debates soon followed: When, precisely, did the Anthropocene begin? Many followed Crutzen’s dating, but some pointed back to the age of European discovery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries or still earlier to the beginning of agriculture at the dawn of the Holocene era. Others argued for a more recent date, the so-called Great Acceleration. These advocates highlighted the globalized spread of industry and fossil fuels and other technological developments, such as the widespread use of fertilizers and nuclear weapons that began permanently scarring the planet.

Many pointed to a single moment: the morning of August 6, 1945, when an atomic mushroom cloud reached tens of thousands of feet above an incinerated Hiroshima.

To some, the Anthropocene serves as a call to action, rising from the simple recognition of our deleterious impact on the planet, most importantly the industrial emissions responsible for global warming. To others, the word can be paralyzing, leaving us feeling helpless before inevitable and abstract processes, hostages of our own progress once the genies of technological innovation have been set loose upon the world. Definitions of the Anthropocene that peg it to CO₂ emissions tend to fixate on heavy industry and technical solutions to global problems: carbon capture, new systems for producing energy, or geoengineering the climate. But here the story becomes, yet again, all about the Industrial Revolution, a history of northern England spreading outward, with global warming the unintended consequence of technological marvels. Writers will mention the invention of the steam engine and then leapfrog to the present as if the development of capitalism was as natural as the sun rising every morning. The rest of the world is typically minimized or left out of these accounts, perpetually waiting in the wings of a history that is never quite their own. Individuals also tend to disappear from these accounts: the decisions people made, what they did and didn't know, how they lived, and what they believed. Human actions fade under the weight of abstraction and inevitability and with them our capacity to imagine a different future.

Most of all, the violence that created our present world of global warming is too often forgotten in the now vast literature on the Anthropocene, including and especially the violence that was the Industrial Revolution. We forget—or don't want to remember—that the Industrial Revolution emerged out of a century and a half of untold predation, made singularly possible by the modern manufacturing and global spread of guns, which made killing infinitely easier. Guns unleashed the most concentrated and widespread slaughter in human history, so much so that—as I will argue—killing became the West's

most profound contribution to world history. Without this globalized violence, the Industrial Revolution would not have happened. It would have emerged in dribs and drabs instead of the explosion that now threatens our existence. To comprehend the predicament we face today, we must return to the beginnings, to all the messiness and dramas of human existence, to the relationships people made and unmade under conditions they inherited and confronted, the awful painful yawning of a history that offers few consolations. We need a narrative that places these detailed social and political histories alongside—indeed in lockstep with—an accounting of the stark planetary destruction humans have wrought during the same period.

Instead of the Anthropocene, we should consider speaking of the Mortecene, the Age of Death and Killing. The Industrial Revolution in England and the United States cannot be explained without understanding the enslavement of Africans and their exploitation in the Americas and the changed landscapes that both created. The factories of Europe and North America cannot be explained without understanding the dispossession of Native Americans and the conversion of their lands into cotton fields and the spread of disease and the destruction of soils in Egypt. The actual workings of coal-fired factories in the United States cannot be explained without also understanding the near extinction of the American bison, whose skins became industrial belts, while large areas of the western United States became one of the world's most polluted areas. The Anthropocene effectively leaves out human predation, slavery, and even imperialism. It leaves out the massive killing at the heart of the creation of a fossil economy, an era when violence reduced everything, including human beings, to goods that could be exchanged in a so-called free market. All this death left its own markers. The Mortecene has shaped who we are, what we value, what we fear and what we have forgotten, and the precarious present we inhabit today.

This is the past we will be exploring in this book: how the world was pulled together and torn apart by greed and violence, how the engines of history that had begun centuries earlier suddenly sped up

and surged out of control like a runaway train or a storm that never ended. We will turn to scenes of terror and suffering and to those who resisted and warned of the world being made as well as to the origins of denialism. *The Killing Age* is the story of the men who wrought this destruction, for it has been men who have largely killed and who have inflicted physical violence on one another and on women and on the innocent. It is also about the people who fought them and who offered and defended alternative visions of a world grounded in communal values such as sharing and environmental responsibility.

We live in troubled times but not ones without hope. Writers, artists, and social movements of all sizes invite us to consider pasts that are still present and, most importantly, to refuse to accept the world as it is and how it has been represented. We will have occasion to meet some of these figures in the pages that follow and, from “the mystic chords of memory,” visit “the better angels of our nature.” These voices of hope and resistance have their own deep histories in the warnings, sorrows, and dreams of the subjugated, and they are not without their own contradictions. But they are also invitations to take responsibility, to collectively grieve for what we have done, and to create new histories, weave stories that shape us, and prepare, together, for our shared future.